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ABSTRACT

In order to educate preservice teachers about the experiences of poor children, a course on critical issues in education incorporated work in social service agencies. The course was based in theories of critical pedagogy as proposed by Paulo Freire, multicultural education, and the ideas of Benjamin R. Barber. The field experience aimed to allow student-teachers a chance to "do" critical pedagogy and to expand their personal/cultural knowledge so that they might better empower their students. For the course, the instructors made contacts with local social service agencies to develop a range of situations in which their students might work an average of 2 hours a week. The instructors stressed that students should learn from those with whom they worked. Students also did weekly readings on education and democracy and submitted at least two pages of written response to the week's readings. Students used journal entries to work out their understandings of theories studied in class as they tried to familiarize themselves with the agency to which they were assigned. Reflection on their agencies' services to clients fed additional reflection on the education process and the student and teacher role. Student response has been favorable. Contains seven references. (JB)

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Making Connections: Classroom Learning and Social Service Agencies

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Making Connections: Classroom Learning and Social Service Agencies

Lyn S. Robertson and Karen L. Graves

February, 1995

As teachers of teachers we feel keenly the responsibility of promoting an agenda of justice and social equality as pedagogical themes in our Education courses at Denison University. We believe that fostering empowerment and social activism based on the belief that each individual is responsible for something more than her or himself is fundamental to education in a democracy. Teachers must at least think about this in order to teach their students effectively and to prepare them to be active citizens.

It is a rare middle or upper middle class college student who has had experiences with people served by social service agencies. Students who wish to become teachers need to know first-hand about some of the situations experienced by poor children who comprise approximately twenty percent of the children in the U.S. [1] They need to know first-hand about substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and teenagers who are sent to juvenile court.

Works such as Savage Inequalities, Life in Schools, and There are No Children Here provide very real descriptions for those uninitiated about issues that attack children's lives. Yet, those descriptions exist "out there." Students need to see and experience as best they can what happens in the lives of children in order to understand and come to conclusions about

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[1] Ann Bastian, Norm Fruchter, Marilyn Gittell, Colin Greer, and Kenneth Haskins, Choosing Equality: The Case for Democratic Schooling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 61.

what teachers and schools could be doing to respond to them in ways that help rather than hurt them.

Recently we have incorporated work in social service agencies into our course, "Critical Issues in U.S. Education." This learning-teaching process is grounded in theories of critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and the ideas expressed by Benjamin R. Barber in An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America. Requiring prospective teachers to engage in social service in the wider community beyond the schools allows them wider opportunity to "do" critical pedagogy, rather than just study it. It expands the personal/cultural knowledge of future teachers so that they are in a better position to empower their students.

Critical pedagogy as proposed to us by Paulo Freire involves teachers-as-students and teachers-as-activists in situations where each person is valued and differences are respected. Freire suggests that if education is to be the practice of freedom, we must move into the world, beyond independent isolation. [2] This is important, he argues, because "...thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world...," and action and reflection upon the world are necessary in order to transform it. [3] Courses in critical pedagogy, then, must include practice in action and reflection gained through such work. Otherwise, critical reflection stands the chance of getting lost in more traditional methods of presentation. Exposure to life outside the classroom is, therefore, a crucial element in employing a critical pedagogy.

It is tempting to behave as "teacher-as-dogooder," instead of teacher-as-student, and so in our course we require a wide range of reading, the discussing of new connections, and the weekly assignment of reflecting critically on experience. We want our students to discover for themselves the forces that pull children, both physically and emotionally, from one place to

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[2] Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 69.
[3] Ibid., 64-66.

another. We want them to develop their own critiques of social service as they see it practiced, of society's reactions to the children served, and of the role of the school in the process. If, as Banks suggests, knowledge is positional, and if it relates to the knower's values and experiences, then it follows that effective teachers must themselves have some understanding of the social conditions and experiences that children in their classes bring to school.[4] Multicultural theorists are concerned with the cultural conflict that develops in schools due to a "mismatch" between the "school knowledge" as represented by the teacher's personal/cultural knowledge and students' own personal/cultural knowledge.[5] All too often this "mismatch" translates into low teacher expectations for students and poor academic performance. A certain remedy is for teachers to study the personal/cultural knowledge of their students.

Critical theorists and those who promote multicultural education agree that knowledge develops through "active and intellectual engagement with information in the context of being human."[6] To do this necessitates focus on direct learning experiences which force active engagement and the linking of ideas with what students tend to term "real life." Stepping outside of the classroom and into different contexts encourages students to reflect from a new perspective on the school as an institution and on our society at large, often resulting in a critical examination of one's own life and values.[7] By moving from the classroom into society, students begin to study society itself as a text. Their own knowledge and experience are repeatedly transformed. [8]

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[4] James A. Banks, "Multicultural Education: Development, Dimensions, and Challenges," Phi Delta Kappan 75 (September 1993): 23.
[5] Ibid., 26.
[6] Quoted in Jeffrey B. Anderson and Kristin Guest, "Service Learning in Teacher Education at Seattle University," in Building Community: Service Learning in the Academic Disciplines, eds. Richard J. Kraft and Marc Swadener (Denver: Colorado Campus Compact, 1994), 141.
[7] Ibid., 142-143.
[8] Ibid., 142.

Barber writes that "...the fundamental task of education in a democracy is...learning to be free." He specifies service learning as an important tool in accomplishing this, not only for the giver of service, but also for the recipient who becomes teacher of the giver.[9] Barber argues that if democracy is to flourish, it must have citizens who are educated for excellence, that is, citizens who have developed knowledge and the competence to govern their own lives. Central to Barber's argument is that freedom is dependent on such political responsibility. [10] The democratic faith is that all are capable of such action; thus, all have the right and the capacity to become citizens. The society which is created is an "aristocracy of everyone." [11] For Barber, its success depends, in large measure, on service to others by citizens taking collective responsibility for the common good. But, Barber warns that it is misleading and dangerous to perceive such service as charity. [12]If his vision of the democratic community is to work, it must expect community service of all.

Barber's notion of citizenship education promotes a critical understanding of how self and community and private interest and public good are necessarily linked. [13] An important connection for us in our work is that such a pedagogy serves to empower students and cultivate activism aimed at social justice and equality.[14] If we expect our beginning teachers to bring this type of learning to their students, it is essential that we afford them the opportunity for such study in their teacher education program.

We began by making a list of the area agencies that we thought would offer useful experiences in which our students would learn while they were contributing their own valuable

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[9] Benjamin R. Barber, An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.
[10] Ibid., 246.
[11] Ibid., 5.
[12] Ibid., 248-249.
[13] Ibid., 249-250.
[14] Ibid., 250.

time and attention. Then we simply called the director of each and offered our students' help. As time goes by we are very aware of the necessity of cultivating these relationships through phone calls and personal contacts.

At the beginning of each semester we give students an annotated list of the agencies where they can work and ask them to list their preferences to guide us in placing them. A list of assignments is produced, and students have the responsibility of calling their contact persons and making arrangements to work an average of two hours each week. Work done by students can range from shadowing a correctional officer of the court to working with the Fair Housing Board to finding quality child care for parents. Any one student might work in several of the programs of the agency or focus on one specific program.

Over the last two semesters, our students have worked in Family Counseling Services, Newark Community Development Office, Juvenile Court Probation Office, Responsible Social Values Program, Family Health Services, Center for Alternative Resources, Square One for Youth, YWCA, Moundbuilders Guidance Center, Mental Health Association of Licking County, Licking County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Child Assault Prevention Project, New Beginnings Shelter for Battered Women, and Licking (County) Alcohol Prevention Program.

Transportation is each individual's responsibility. Students who do not have access to a car may use one of the college's cars after taking a defensive driving course conducted by college security officers.

We stress the importance of learning from the people one works with, even when the job is that of conveying knowledge, and we schedule pertinent readings throughout the course. Articles and portions of text by Freire, Kozol, McClaren, and Bastian, for example, weave through the course. We have included a course outline for your perusal.

Each Tuesday students hand in a minimum of two pages in which they respond to the previous week's reading, and every

Friday they are responsible for at least a page reflecting on their community-based work. We talk of using the work as a text which can be brought into class discussions and reading responses.

Student response to the social service component of Education 290 has been favorable, thus far. One student commented on a course evaluation that she was "...happy to see that the Education Department has taken the time to put something like this together because...it is important for students to...be aware of the social problems that surround us [from] which many of us have been sheltered...." Our goal of widening our students' personal/cultural knowledge, particularly the effort to understand how difficulties encountered by secondary school students might affect learning, seems to have been reached, at least with that student. Another student commented in her journal that it is "...easy to see how so much anger, betrayal and confusion would affect their [students'] attitudes at school." Another argued that a program which labeled children as being "at risk" threw a negative light on the students that they did not deserve. He went on the say that the students he worked with should be praised for their perseverence and courage. Denison students came to appreciate the difficulty of lives other than their own and they began to understand the complexity of roles a teacher plays in society.

Students used journal entries to work out their understandings of theories studied in class as they tried to understand the agency to which they were assigned. As we contrasted functionalist and conflict theorist perspectives, studied hegemonic theory, and differentiated between macro and micro objectives in schooling, students generated questions to aid them in their observations at the agencies. For example, students considered whether social service agencies are a product of democracy. They asked, for example, "Are the [clients] being served solely from a functionalist perspective or are they being served 'for the sake of being served'?...in an educational setting, would the children be taught for the sake of

fitting into a [prescribed] place in society or would they be 'learning for the sake of learning'?" and, "does the agency prepare those it helps to function as 'good' citizens within the society?"

For those in our classes who will become teachers, be responsible for public policy decisions, or live as active citizens of their communities, learning to ask and debate such questions is vital. We believe the experience of working in a social service agency as a complement to critical reflection in class advances their abilities to address policy questions from informed perspectives. We find it encouraging that our students take up this work with enthusiasm and believe this pedagogy to be education for democracy.

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